

N-117

by jcrighter

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Summary: After going through the Forerunner Interstellar Bridge and defeating Saren together, Chief and Shepherd must find the Focus Icon and the second Bridge. Only problem is that the Collectors have the Icon in their base. Chief must help Shepherd assemble a team strong enough to travel through the Omega-4 Relay if he ever hope of finding the Icon and returning home.

1. Chapter 1: The Beginning

****I know it has been awhile but I wanted to make sure I had the plotline ready before I started writing. This will be one of the shorter chapters (Still longer than 90% of Halofall Star Effect's chapters) so bear with me. I really wanted to set the ground work for the whole story. I really hope you enjoy it and give me some feedback on it.****

****I do not own anything from these stories but I do own any original content.****

****Chapter One: The Beginning****

****The Illusive Man's Office****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

"Shepherd did everything right." The raven haired woman said in her thick Australian accent. She turned to face the seated man, "He stopped Saren and the Reapers. He saved the Council. What more can you ask of him?"

It was the man's turn to speak. He flicked ash off the tip of his cigarette and took a long drag. He exhaled the grey smoke and blew it out of his face, "You and I both know that the Reapers are coming in

full force. While the Council wishes to turn a blind eye to it, I won't. We need Shepherd. Make it happen."

"What about the other man with him. The armored soldier that helped him defeat Sovereign?" she asked.

The Illusive Man turned to his computer system, a massive display of monitor screens and keyboard systems. He keyed one of the consoles and the center screen changed to a video feed from the Council Chambers. He zoomed the feed in on the image of an olive green armored soldier that he had never seen before the video. He watched the video twenty times to make sure he wasn't seeing things. The soldier was unstoppable and uncontrollable, two things that he disliked.

He sat back in his chair and smirked, "He's expendable."

"Yes, sir." The girl said, "I will get started right away."

"Good." He took another drag of his cigarette, "Put Project Lazarus in process."

"Right away, sir." The girl nodded, "Miranda out."

Her image faded away, leaving the Illusive Man alone in his chair. He looked up at his computer screen. The video had continued to play and it was showing how Shepherd and the soldier had to fight Saren's Husk form. The Illusive Man reached for his glass of scotch that sat on the coaster to his right. He sipped the liquor and took another drag from his cigarette. All the while, he kept his blue eyes on the screen.

****UNSC **_**Pillar of Autumn**_**

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Halo Universe****

"Chief, we need to get to the escape pod!" Cortana yelled in his ear as he fired three shots into an attacking Sangheili soldier. The first two shots took out the alien's shields while the third hit him right between the eyes. He turned down the hallway and hung a right around the corner.

A team of marines were pinned down by a group of Covenant forces and Chief had to jump in. He snapped his pistol back to his hip and reached for the assault rifle that hung on his back. He hopped over the makeshift cover the marines set up and tossed a frag grenade at the enemy.

The explosion took out a few of the Grunts and disabled the Elite's shielding. The Elite attempted to slap Chief with his plasma rifle but the Spartan dodged the attack. He shoved the barrel of his assault rifle under the Elite's chin and pulled the trigger. Purple blood squirted out in all directions.

The marines cleared out the rest of the Grunts and regrouped with Chief, "Thanks, Chief. We owe you one."

"We need to get to the escape pods." Chief told them, "Keyes has

ordered an abandon ship."

"Lead the way, sir." The lead marine sounded, pointing his rifle down the hallway the Covenant had come from. Chief simply nodded and trekked on.

They moved through a set of service corridors until they heard gun fire. They rushed to the scene and were greeted by a small team of three marines guarding an escape pod from two groups of Covenant forces.

Chief sprang into action. He fired a burst shot from his rifle, taking out a few Grunts. He rolled to dodge a purple needle that one of the Grunt's had fired. The needle slammed against the wall, leaving a burn mark on it. Chief unload his magazine into the group, never missing a shot.

The marines attempted to help but Chief was too fast for them. The enemy was dead before they could get a real shot off. Chief stood up to his full height and turned to the marines, "Get in the pod."

The marines piled in, filling every seat in the pod. Chief entered and noticed that fact and shrugged. He didn't need a seat.

"Now would be a very good time to leave." Cortana said in his helmet.

Chief looked up at the Bumblebee pilot and nodded, "Punch it."

"Aye aye, sir." She bellowed, turning around to her controls. Chief felt the Bumblebee break away from the airlock, "We're disengaging. Goin' for minimum safe distance."

"We're going to make it, aren't we, sir?" a marine looked up to Chief and asked, "I don't want to die out here!"

Not knowing what else to do, Chief patted the marine on the shoulder and nodded. Cortana got his attention with a simple, "Look!"

He raced to the front and grabbed the back of the pilot's chair to hold himself up. Out of the cockpit, he got his first real glimpse at the target below. The structure was shaped like a ring. The bottom of the ring, facing outward, was made of a silver-looking metal. The inward side of the ring was what really caught his eye. To Chief, the inside looked to have landmasses on it, including oceans and mountains. The idea was impossible but he was seeing it with his own two eyes.

"What is that thing, Lieutenant?" asked one of the marines to the pilot.

"Hell if I know but we're landing on it." Was her response.

The marine that Chief had attempted to comfort sounded out, "The _Autumn_! She's been hit!"

Chief turned his attention to the ship and noticed that she was taking damaging hits from plasma torpedoes. Cortana said what he was thinking, "I knew it! The _Autumn_ is accelerating, Keyes is going in manually!"

"Heads up, everyone, this is it!" the pilot yelled, "We're breaking the ring's atmosphere in five."

"Sure you don't want to take a seat." Cortana asked him.

"We'll be fine." He grunted.

"If I still had fingers, they'd be crossed." She said as the Bumblebee crashed through the atmosphere of the ring. The pilot fought for control of the shuttle, attempting to find a decent landing zone.

"We're coming in too fast!" Cortana yelled as they broke the cloud line. The Bumblebee shot out over the hilltop and over a ravine with a river running through it.

"Damn! Air brake failure! They blew too early! I'm losin' her. Brace for impact!" the pilot yelled as the pod crashed into the ground and Chief's vision went white.

****The Citadel****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

"Wake up, John." Was all he heard and he shot up out of his bed with his SmartPistol pointed at the door. He was breathing heavy and was covered in sweat. It took him a moment to realize that he was standing in his bedroom that the Alliance gave to him on the Citadel, not in the Bumblebee that took him to the first Halo ring.

He lowered his pistol and sat on the end of the bed. _That was over six years ago_, he told himself, _Why am I still dreaming about it_?

"Another dream, John?" he turned to see that Cortana's blue avatar stood over the small device that Halsey had given him. The device allowed Cortana to appear in her avatar form when her chip was in placed inside it. He mainly used it to store the chip safely when he wasn't wearing his armor.

"It was the _Autumn_." He whispered, "The day we found Alpha Halo."

Cortana was quiet for a moment before speaking, "It's in the past, Chief. There is nothing we can do about it, now."

"I know." He stood up and entered the bathroom. He turned on the hot water and began to strip down for his shower. Ten minutes later, he reappeared in the room, dressed in Alliance fatigues. Shepherd had to make a special order for Chief since he was so large. Even with the special order, he still felt uncomfortable in the different military's uniform. He wasn't a part of the System Alliance. He was a part of the United Nations Space Command.

He grabbed Cortana's storage device and clipped it to his belt so it was on his left hip. He picked his SmartPistol up from off the desk and holstered it to his right hip. Chief finished his outfit with an

Alliance ball cap to cover his shaved head.

Once he was sure he was ready, he exited the apartment and headed for the science lab to find Doctor Halsey. Sure enough, the good doctor was already at work behind her computer terminal. She stood up as he walked in, "John, good morning."

"Good morning, Doctor Halsey." He told her, grabbing a ceramic cup from the cupboard and pouring himself a cup of coffee. Halsey pointed to the creamer and sugar but Chief shook it off. He leaned against the lab table, sipping the bitter drink, "Got anything?"

Halsey shook her head, "Not yet. For a society that lives off Prothean technology, they don't seem to know a lot about them. We didn't use any Forerunner tech until we knew for sure what we were messing with. So far, they barely understand the fundamentals of the things that govern their daily lives. It's a wonder how they've survived this long."

Chief shook his head and took another sip from his coffee. The door slid open and they turned to see who was entering the lab. In the doorway, stood Doctor Liara T'soni, dressed in a white lab coat and a pair of tan slacks.

Doctor T'soni was a member of a species known as the Asari. The all-female species looked similar to human females save for the blue skin and tentacle-looking head fringe instead of head hair. Liara's facial markings looked like she had eyebrows and freckles, allowing her to catch the eyes of humans, male and female alike. While Chief understood that she was attractive, he didn't have those feelings towards her. The only thing she had going for him was how much her blue skin reminded him of Cortana, though he would never let Cortana know that.

"Liara, what do we owe the early surprise?" Halsey asked the Asari researcher.

Liara smiled, "Catherine, you are going to want to hear this."

Halsey sat up, giving Liara her full attention. Chief stepped away from the table to hear what the Asari had to say, "Well, out with it."

"I think I should wait until Shepherd arrives. He should be here in a few minutes anyway." Was her response, causing Halsey to lean back in her chair.

Chief hadn't seen Shepherd in almost a week. Ever since their first encounter, Chief and Shepherd had become pretty close. Combat and war tends to do that to people.

Two months ago, Chief's idea of his galaxy was turned upside down when the knowledge that there was more than just life outside their galaxy but life outside their universe came in the form of a disabled cruiser and a frigate that made a wrong turn. As far as he knows, there are two other universes besides his own. There is the universe he is in now, where Shepherd and Liara call home, and the universe that belonged to his friend Ian Hawke, the Militia Pilot who gave him the SmartPistol. Together, with the help of some others from another

galaxy far, far away, they fought for control over what became known as a Forerunner Interstellar Bridge, or FIB for short. Once they had control of the FIB, Chief, Shepherd, Hawke, and a Jedi named Jaden were selected by the Librarian to find the four Focus Icons.

They already found the one that connects to Chief's FIB so there is only three more to find. Chief and Shepherd went to Shepherd's universe to find the second while Hawke and Jaden headed into Hawke's universe to find the third. They planned to meet back in Chief's universe to find the fourth which is in Jaden's galaxy.

That gave Chief and Shepherd two objectives. They need to find the Focus Icon and the Forerunner Interstellar Bridge that it goes to. That is Chief and Halsey's only way to go home and to stop whatever the Librarian is so afraid of. Since arriving, Halsey, Liara, and Cortana had been pouring countless hours into finding any kind of reference to the Icon or the Bridge while all Chief could do was sit and wait. Even Shepherd got to go on special Alliance mission to keep himself busy, leaving Chief alone.

He didn't mind though. Being alone is normal for a Spartan. In fact, most Spartan IIs work alone to keep the causality levels lower. When more than two or three Spartan IIs got together, all hell broke loose. The only team that ever seemed to work correctly was Chief's original team, Blue Team. After he returned from Requiem, four years after the end of the Human-Covenant War, he was told by his commanding officers that they died on Reach. Fred, Linda, and Kelly were dead and he was the last living Spartan II.

He didn't want to believe it but all the records that Cortana could dig up spoke the truth. He kept reminding himself that Spartans don't die; they only go missing in action. He knew that line very well. It was the line they placed on his headstone when they believed him dead. If only they knew how correct that saying was.

Whatever Liara had to say, Shepherd needed to hear it, too. On cue, the doors slid open, revealing the Alliance commander and the first human Spectre, John Shepherd. Standing at a little under six feet tall, the soldier wore his N7 issued Onyx-class hard suit. The base color of the suit was a deep black with red stripes going down the arms and legs. Shepherd usually carried all kinds of weapons, ranging from pistols to assault rifles to sniper rifles. Instead, he carried his Carniflex hand cannon on his left hip with the handle pointed in front of him and a Scimitar shotgun strapped to the small of his back.

When Chief had first met the soldier, he had long, slicked back, blond hair with a light beard. His time away from the Alliance had allowed him to break a few rules but he was back now. He had to keep up with regulations.

He had cut his hair down. On the sides, it was shaved down the skin while the top was only a little bit longer than the sides. He had shaved off his beard, revealing the facial scar on his right cheek. However, his icy blue eyes still seem to look straight through a person.

He perked up when he spotted Chief and out reached his hand, "Good to see you, again, Chief."

Chief took it, "Likewise."

The pass week, Shepherd and the Normandy were out doing attack missions on some Geth bases. The Geth, a robotic, AI-powered combat force created by the nomadic Quarrians, had made up the bulk of Saren's military and had several small bases scattered throughout the galaxy. Shepherd's job was to locate them and take them out.

The commander looked at Liara, "So what's all this about, Liara?"

The Asari smiled to herself as she brought up her omni-tool. The orange holographic device wrapped around her arm, ending at her elbow. At the circular section where her left hand was, she began digging through files to find the one she wanted to show them.

She clicked a file and outstretched her arm so the omni-tool can project what she was looking at. On the table in front of them, an image of a large planet covered in a grey, rocky surface appear. Dark lines showed forgotten river lines and lakes that had dried up over time.

"Liara, I don't understand what we are looking at here." Shepherd stated.

"This is Alchera. It is the fourth planet in the Amada System in the Omega Nebula. To the untrained eye, it looks like nothing but a forgotten rock but I have been looking into the planet's history. This planet has some play in a Batarian myth. According to the myth, when they die in this life, their soul leaves the body through the eyes and is transferred to a vault to wait for their loved ones. That vault is believed to be on Alchera." Liara explained.

"I'm sorry, Liara, but you want us to chase after a bedtime story Momma Batarians tell little baby Batarians?" Halsey stated, "You're going to need much more than that."

Liara smiled, like she knew that Halsey was going to say something along those lines. She rotated the planet and fast forwarded, "This image is from a Salarian Special Task Group spy satellite. I can't say how I got this feed but let's just say I got it from our friend from Virmire, Shepherd."

Shepherd simply nodded, knowing that saying too much could get a certain Salarian captain in trouble. Chief recalled Shepherd's story of their battle on the planet Virmire. They were chasing Saren, a rouge Turian Spectre agent, and his Geth army. They got a lead that he had taken over a Salarian research lab on a planet called Virmire and headed there. They got pinned down by Anti-Aircraft turrets so they had to make a landing. They were met by a small team of STG agents led by a Captain Kirrahe. Together, they fought their way to the lab in hopes to use a nuclear bomb to destroy the structure. They succeeded and got mostly everyone out. Shepherd had to leave behind one his own. Gunnery Sergeant Ashley Williams died making sure that the Normandy and her crew got away safely. It was touchy subject for the Alliance commander.

"Anyway," Liara continued, "this is the footage from about three months ago. You will see something that will look familiar to you all."

She paused when they saw it. The massive squid-looking machine dropped out of FTL travel and stopped just above the planet. Liara paused it seconds after it unleashed several Geth transport ships on the planet. She looked up at Shepherd first, "Someone else thought it was important."

"Saren." Shepherd grunted. Chief noticed Shepherd's fist clench up for a second before releasing them, "Liara, you always know how to catch my attention."

The Asari smiled at her victory, "This planet was important enough for Saren to search the planet personally. It is our first solid lead."

Chief felt the device vibrate on his hip. He pulled it off and placed it on the table. He was wondering when Cortana would add her input. The blue hologram appeared over the storage unit, "I will have to agree with Liara. We can't afford to just sit around and do nothing."

Chief nodded at the AI unit to show he backed her.

"I haven't even gotten to the best part, yet." Liara added, "Three ships have gone missing with no signs of anything. Something is guarding that planet and we need to find out why."

"This vault," Chief jumped in, "could it house the Icon?"

"If it exists," she answered, pausing to choose her next word carefully, "maybe."

"It will take a few days for me to convince Admiral Hackett to let me use the Normandy for non-Alliance work. Maybe I can get Councilor Anderson on board with me." Shepherd explained. After the Battle for the Citadel, the Citadel Council had asked Commander Shepherd who he believed would make the better candidate for the first human councilor. Shepherd had nominated his former commanding officer, Captain David Anderson. He won the election by a landslide, thanks to Shepherd's actions.

"You are a Spectre, Shepherd." Halsey said, "It should be easy enough."

"You would think." The commander said, "I'll get started right away. Liara, keep researching everything you can about this planet and this vault and why Saren found it so important. Chief, start packing."

The Spartan nodded to the Spectre agent as he stormed out of the room like he was on a deadly mission. The doors closed behind him and Chief looked back at Doctor Halsey, "Where's my suit?"

"Right below us in the secondary laboratory. You will find it there." She answered.

Without saying another word, the Spartan grabbed Cortana's storage unit and replaced it on his belt. He took Shepherd's cue and left the way he did. Instead of making a right, he turned left for the nearby staircase. He took it down to the next level and used the ID code

Halsey sent him to gain access to the room.

The lights hummed to life as he entered. Four lab stations took up the center of the room. On each table, different UNSC and Separatist weapons rested. For having very little time to pack, they sure did manage to bring a lot of guns.

The first table was for small arms. Mostly magnums, assault rifles, and battle rifles. The next had a .50 caliber sniper rifle propped up on its tripod and a shotgun underneath it. The third table was the heavy weapons. He ran his hand on the Spartan Laser that sat next to the duel cannoned rocket launcher. The final table was for the Separatist weapons the Arbiter must have loaned them. Two energy swords, two plasma rifles, two plasma pistols, and a fuel rod cannon were ready for action.

At the end of the room was what he was really after. Standing straight up at over seven feet tall was his massive olive green MJOLNIR VIII Spartan armor. The human state-of-the-art exoskeleton stood with its back towards Chief and its arms stretched out to its sides. The boots remained intact but the rest opened up so he could step inside it. On the small table next to it, his helmet and gauntlets sat waiting for him to put on manually.

He unclipped his pistol and Cortana's device from his belt and placed them next to the helmet. He stepped inside the boots and stretched his arms out to fit inside the armor. He gave it the command order and the armor sealed up around his body. He felt the back locks snap into place and vacuum seal shut.

Once that was complete, he reached for his gauntlets and slipped them over his hands. He twisted the ends where it met the rest of the armor and they locked as well. He tossed the ball cap onto the table and replaced it with his helmet.

Cortana smiled at him, "Don't take this the wrong way but you look better in the armor."

"Then, how come everyone wants to catch a glimpse of me out of it?" he asked her, yanking her data chip out of the device and slamming it into the back of his helmet. Back on the Infinity, he would step out to get something from another room or his suit would be getting looked over after a mission and crowds of UNSC military staff would stare at him, trying to get that little glimpse at the man behind the mask. The one thing this universe had going for him was that nobody knew him. He could walk around without his armor without anyone staring or saluting. Without the armor, he was normal for the first time since childhood.

"You're a hero, John. You need to stare realizing that." Was her answer. He didn't reply. He simply snapped his SmartPistol to his right hip and the storage unit to the small of his back. He turned and grabbed the metal carrying case off the ground and began to fill it with some weapons. He didn't want to take everything. He only brought what he knew he would need. He started with the sniper rifle. He broke it down into four different pieces and placed it inside the case. He tossed a battle rifle, a few frag grenades, and an energy sword inside, as well. He filled the rest of the case with enough ammo to keep himself alive. If he ran out of ammo, he wasn't going to survive much longer anyway.

He snapped the case to the back of his armor and headed out, locking the door behind him. He turned and headed for the elevator. He trusted that Shepherd would be able to convince Hackett to send the _Normandy_ so Chief figured he would bring his stuff on board now. He took the elevator down to the docking levels and found the small frigate docked in D-24.

The _Normandy_ was nothing compared to some of the ships the UNSC had but it looked a whole lot nicer than them. The ship had a long nose that made up most of its length. At the back end of the nose, the rest of the cabin space bulked out from underneath. The engine coils were at the back, as well, with two long wings branching off the sides.

The ship was a beauty with its blue and white coloring. Shepherd had explained that the ship was a joint project between humans and the militaristic Turians to create the perfect stealth fighter. The _Normandy_'s stealth drives made it virtually impossible to detect unless it got caught in the enemy ship's viewports. Since her recent enemies had been the windowless Geth, she was unstoppable.

He headed for the airlock but was stopped by an Alliance soldier, "I'm sorry, sir, but this ship is for Alliance business alone."

The soldier looked up into Chief's orange visor. Chief's scanners showed that the man was scared out of his mind but he didn't show it. It was the only reason why Chief didn't use his body to pry open the airlock doors.

"He's with me, Corporal." Chief turned to see Liara had had the same idea. She had stripped away the lab coat and replaced it with a pink hardsuit. It was the same hardsuit she wore in the Battle for the FIB.

"I'm sorry, Doctor T'soni, but I will need to see his ID." He told the Asari.

"This man is the reason why you have a job, Corporal. Without him, Saren and the Geth would be ruling the galaxy. Let him in or I will show you why you don't piss off an Asari." She barked at him. The tips of her pink fingers began to shine with the blue dark matter that were her biotics.

Liara, like all Asari, is very gifted in the use of what is known as biotics. She has the ability to use mass effect pulses to create a dark matter surge. She could use the biotics to move objects, stun people, and cause explosions. Chief hadn't found himself on the other end of them yet but he knew it would only be a matter of time.

"Right, of course." His signs were off the charts now, "Sir, all I need is a name."

Chief brought up the omni-tool Liara had given him. The device carried Chief's new name that he used in this new universe. He was so used everyone going by his callsign that he kept it a part of it, "John Sierra."

The corporal opened his own omni-tool and scanned the name in,

"Proceed through the airlock. I'm sorry for the mishap. It won't happen again, sir."

"It better not." Liara stared daggers at him before the two of them stepped into the airlock.

"Remind me to stay on her good side, Chief." Cortana said and Chief smiled under his helmet.

"I'm sorry about that." Liara stated, the blue energy disappearing from her fingers, "Hackett has buffed up security everywhere after the Geth attack."

"Rightly so." Was Chief's response as the airlock decontaminated them and opened up to long hallway-like command deck. The _Normandy_'s bridge was a whole lot different than any UNSC ship's bridge. On a UNSC bridge, the cockpit, the command center, and the system stations were all within eye sight of the commanding officer on deck. On the _Normandy_, the cockpit was located at the tip of the ship's nose. Behind the cockpit, a long stretch of computer terminals lined a hallway that lead to, what Shepherd called, the CIC, Combat Information Center. At the center of the CIC, a large galaxy map hovered above a circular control station with a ramp leading up to the map for the commanding officer to oversee everything.

Usually, Shepherd would be the one standing there but, in his absence, Navigator Charles Pressley stood in his place. The bald man stood with his hands behind his back and he wore his Alliance uniform proudly. Chief had only met the man a few times but he knew that he was a man that he could trust.

"Liara," the man's eyes lit up, "it's so good to see you, again."

The navigator stepped down from his post to greet them. Liara shook the man's hand, "It's good to see you, too, Charles."

Pressly nodded and looked over Chief, "So you are still with us, Master Chief. It's been awhile."

"It has." Chief grunted, "Where will I be staying?"

"That's if we can get the permission to launch, first." Pressly told him, "I just got the message from Shepherd. He was on his way to talk to Councilor Anderson to see if he could get some Council support with this little mission. As for sleeping arrangements, I can have them set up a cot under the engineering deck. It gets pretty dark and lonely down there though."

"I'll take it." Chief told him with no hesitation. _Less through traffic, the better_, he thought to himself.

"Very well." Pressly told him, "Liara, Doctor Chakwas has already given up her office for you. She said that she would rather sleep with the crew, anyway."

"She didn't have to do that but it is much appreciated." The Asari smiled, "Come on, Chief, I will show you to your room."

Chief followed Liara down a small flight of stairs that lead to a

deck underneath the CIC. The deck contained the mess hall, crew quarters, med lab, captain's cabin, and the escape pods. Chief found the set up very odd but he decided not to ask questions. The elevator doors opened and they stepped inside.

Liara reached over and pressed the down button. Chief was used to spending hours walking back to his quarters. On the Normandy, he could be at the bridge in minutes due to its smaller size.

The doors opened up to the docking bay for the Mako tank and the crew lockers. Several servicemen were working on the tank and checking supply shipments. Liara turned the corner and headed down a hallway. Chief followed her through a doorway into the engine room. The large element zero core hummed quietly as the engineers kept it stable. The head engineer, Adams, turned and gave Liara and Chief a kindly wave before returning to his duties. Liara pointed to a dimly lit staircase that led underneath the engineering deck, "The area Pressly was talking about is right under there. I'm going to see to it that you get a decent cot and a light fixture so you go on ahead. I'll also let Adams know that he has someone living in his basement."

"Thank you, Liara." He told her and watched the Asari disappear through the door that he had followed her through. He headed down the staircase alone, using his helmet light to guide him. Once he found a decent spot to call home, he stopped. He was surprised how quiet it was down there, even with the engine core right above him. He sat down on a nearby cargo crate and pulled Cortana's chip out of his helmet.

The blue avatar of his AI appeared over it and looked around, "Home sweet home, I guess."

"We'll get used to it." He told her.

"Yeah, I guess after the Dawn anything can feel homely."

He placed her chip into the storage device and placed it on the floor so he wouldn't have to hold the chip, "Cortana, is it just me or does this whole thing leave a bad taste in your mouth?"

"No, I felt it, too. I have a bad feeling about all this but it's the only lead we have on the Icon."

"Best case scenario?" he asked.

"We locate the vault and find the Icon with no issue."

"Worst?"

"We die."

Chief was quiet for a second before nodding, "Sounds about right."

****How was that for a starter? I wanted to bring action in right away since HFSE didn't have any until a few chapters in so I added the flashback scene. I really hope you enjoyed reading my first chapter and will continue to read into it. Thank you!****

2. Chapter 2: Departure

****I do not own anything from these stories but I do own any original content.****

****Chapter Two: Departure****

****The Citadel****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

Commander Shepherd rode the elevator up to Councilor Anderson's office on the Presidium. He had only spoken to his former commanding officer twice since the election because of how busy their lives have become. They still exchanged e-mails over the Extranet so Shepherd was kept in the loop on Council affairs. Being a Spectre does have its privileges.

Shepherd thought back to when he first was given the title. It was after he returned from Eden Prime and proved that Saren had gone rouge. The Council decided to recruit Shepherd into the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance team, Spectre for short. Spectres had the right to move around the galactic laws and do what they believe is right for the whole galaxy. It's a heavy burden, heavier than he thought it was going to be.

The elevator doors opened and Shepherd was greeted by two Alliance soldiers. They saluted him as he approached and scanned his omni-tool for the proper information. Shepherd had noted the increase in security since the Geth attack. Since Citadel Security had been wiped out during the invasion, the Alliance had stepped in while C-Sec regrouped and retrained officers.

A third man appeared, splitting the two soldiers. He was also in Alliance fatigues but the insignia on breast plate told him that this man was in charge. Unlike the assault rifle carrying soldiers, he kept a Predator pistol on his left hip. He had short cropped hair, similar to Shepherd's, and brown eyes.

"Commander Shepherd, I am Lieutenant Armando-Owen Bailey of the Alliance. I have been assigned to oversee the protection of Councilor Anderson and reinstatement of Citadel Security." The man introduced himself, "Councilor Anderson sent me to escort you, personally, to his office."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Shepherd responded, beckoning him to lead the way. He followed the Alliance soldier across a metal bridge. Shepherd had been trying his best to avoid the Presidium since the Geth attack. It had been where he had joined the fight when his team drove the Mako through a micro Mass Relay that led them there.

He could see that the keepers, the small insect-like creatures that maintained the Citadel, had done an incredible amount of work on the grand level. Instead of it looking like it took on a full scale battle, it seemed to have just been a minor tussle, judging by the remaining damage.

They turned down a narrow hallway guarded by four Alliance soldiers. At the end of the hallway was a metal door which Bailey opened with a push of an omni-tool button. The room opened up to a large square room with a single desk and three holopads. Shepherd knew the pads were so Anderson could speak with the other three councilors from the privacy of his office.

At first sight of them, Councilor Anderson stood up from his desk. Shepherd had been so used to seeing him in his Alliance captain's uniform that seeing him in the long councilor robes caught him a little off guard. The robe started at the base of his neck and rolled down to his feet with white and blue coloring. He looked extremely uncomfortable in the attire.

Bailey saluted, "Councilor Anderson, Spectre agent Commander Shepherd is here to speak with you."

"At ease, Bailey." Anderson smirked, "I can see that. You are dismissed."

"Yes, sir." The Alliance lieutenant nodded, turned on his heels, and stepped out of the room. The doors closed behind him.

Shepherd looked Anderson up and down for a second before smiling at the former Alliance officer, "You look, uh, nice."

"Udina keeps insisting that I wear these foolish robes to please the other councilors." Anderson explained, "As stupid as it sounds, it kinda works."

"I'll take your word for it." Shepherd said. Anderson pointed to a metal chair across from his desk. Shepherd gladly took it as Anderson sat down, "Sadly, I'm not here to talk fashion statements, Anderson."

"Yes, I figured that." The dark-skinned man frowned, "What have you found?"

Shepherd smiled because he knew that Anderson knew what was going on. Anderson is the only other person, outside Shepherd's circle, that knows about what truly happened when they went through the Mu Relay. As far as Hackett knows, the Master Chief is a bounty hunter from the Terminus Systems. Chief kept up with the charade perfectly, "Lara thinks she found a lead on Alchera, a planet in the Amada System. Saren had paid a visit to the planet when he was under Sovereign's control and three ships have disappeared in the past two weeks there. Something's up."

Anderson nodded, "I am aware of the three ships. One was a human colony ship moving supplies. The other two were Volus trade ships that got lost. No signs of rubble or attack."

"So you're already thinking what I'm thinking." Shepherd sat back in his chair, arms crossed.

"I know what you want to do, Shepherd, and I'm behind you on it but I'm not the problem. The problem is Hackett. He wants to use you and the Normandy on the small Geth pockets that still litter the galaxy. He can't afford to lose you on a wild goose chase." Anderson explained, "Again."

"Hackett wants the _Normandy_ to chase after Geth, correct?" Shepherd asked.

"That's what it looks like, yes." Anderson answered.

"What if there was a Geth base on Alchera? I have proof that Saren had visited the planet. Most likely, he would have left a fortified base behind if he found something there. Hackett gets one less Geth base to worry about and I get to take a look around Alchera. Everyone wins." Shepherd told the councilor.

Anderson thought about it for a moment before answering, "That could work. It would take a lot more than theories and word-to-mouth but it could work."

"Don't worry, Anderson. I'm pretty good at finding proof."

"In the last case, the proof found you, remember?" Anderson smiled.

Shepherd stood up, "All I need is you behind me and a meeting with Admiral Hackett as soon as possible. Do we have a deal?"

Shepherd stuck out his right hand and Anderson took it, "You got a deal. I will contact you as soon as I hear back from Hackett. I'll see you soon, Shepherd."

"Likewise, Anderson."

****SSV **_**Kilimanjaro**_**

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

Shepherd entered the circular room with Liara by his side. Shepherd had changed out of his Onyx hardsuit and put on his Alliance uniform. Shepherd had only met with the fleet admiral a few times in his time with the Alliance and knew that he liked to keep things formal.

Liara wore her tan slacks and lab coat with her ID badge on it. It was similar to the outfit she wore a few days ago in the science lab.

It had taken Anderson two days to set up this meeting which gave Shepherd enough time to come up with several reasons why they needed to explore Alchera without giving away the real reason for being there.

Only two other people shared the room with them. Councilor Anderson traded his robes for his old Alliance uniform. The second man was Fleet Admiral Steven Hackett. He was a tall man with enough facial scarring to make him look older than what he was. He kept an Alliance ball cap over his head to hide the balding that was taking place under it.

Shepherd stopped before them and saluted. Liara bowed, instead.

"At ease, Shepherd." Hackett sounded, "Anderson has filled me in on Alchera. You believe that Saren had visited the planet. Do you have proof of this?"

"I do, sir." Liara stated. She knew that she couldn't show the STG footage since it would rat out Kirrahe. Instead, she managed to doctor a few data strains, with Cortana's help, to make it appear that she got the information from a transmission between Saren and one of his Krogan battlemaster. She played the transmission.

"Sir, you want us to go where?" a grunted voice of a Krogan came through. Liara had to call in a special favor to get Wrex to send him this sound bite.

"The Amara System." A Turian voice came through that sounded so much like Saren that it sent a shiver down Shepherd's spine.

"The Amara System? What the hell is there?" The Krogan responded.

"You will see when you get there. I will be meeting you there, personally." The fake Saren told the Krogan, "Saren out."

With the transmission complete, Liara deactivated her omni-tool and waited for Hackett to respond.

"Interesting. There was something there that Saren wanted to look into personally." Hackett believed, "He was so worried that he brought a Krogan battlemaster with him. That's something."

"So you understand why the Normandy needs to be dispatched to the Amara System." Shepherd stated.

"I believe that something should be dispatched but I'm not sure if I want to risk the Normandy. It might just be for nothing." Hackett claimed.

"Admiral, you said it yourself that Saren found the planet interesting enough to travel there himself." Anderson tried, "Saren wouldn't want to go somewhere on a hunch."

"No, he wouldn't but I can't risk it." Hackett stated, "I'll send a recon ship to the planet to scout the area."

"What about the three ships that have gone missing over Alchera?" Shepherd questioned, "Virtually vanished without so much of a trace. Your recon ship won't even make it to the planet before it's gone, too. We need a ship with a stealth drive. We need the Normandy, sir."

Hackett was quiet. He was thinking about the evidence in front of him.

"Admiral, remember the last time we failed to listen to Shepherd's instincts?" Anderson explained, "We denied that Saren could be a rouge Spectre. Shepherd proved us wrong. We denied that Saren was a threat. Shepherd proved us wrong. We denied the existence of the Reapers. Shepherd proved us wrong."

"Shepherd proved that there was a single Reaper, not an army of

them." Hackett interrupted, "While I agree that Shepherd's instincts have been correct in the past, I can't make decisions on that alone, Councilor."

"There are more Reapers out there, Admiral, but that is not what this is about." Said Shepherd, "All I'm asking is one trip to the planet to make sure there is no Geth involvement there."

"One week." He said, "You have one week. If you do not find anything in that time, you will be recalled back to the Fifth Fleet, pending new orders. Understood, Commander?"

"Loud and clear, Admiral." Shepherd sounded with a smile, "We will leave at once."

****SSV**_**Normandy**_** SR-1****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

Joker had already started his checklist five minutes before he got the message from Shepherd. He knew that if anyone could convince the old man to let them launch, it was Shepherd. He ran through everything three times before giving them the all clear.

"Adams, how's the engine looking?" he asked into his comm systems.

"She's humming like a bird down here, Joker." Adams responded over the comms.

"Excellent, Adams, I can't wait to hear her sing again."

"You and me both, son. Adams out."

Joker switched back to his commands. He rechecked everything like a kid with OCD. The door opened behind him and he knew that it would Pressly, "Coming to check out my handy work, Press?"

"How do you do that?" the navigator asked.

"Do what?"

"Know that it's me every time?"

"You're just very predictable, Press." The truth was that he had a security camera outside the cockpit. With a flick of a button, he had a live footage of the area outside the airlock. He saw Pressly approaching but he wasn't going to tell him that.

"Yeah, I'm sure." He said, "What's our status?"

"All green and ready to go. We just have one problem."

"And that being?" the executive officer asked.

"We're still waiting on our commanding officer." The helmsman smiled back at Pressly.

The bald man simply shook his head and walked out, leaving Joker alone in the cockpit. He preferred it that way. It was just him and his ship.

****SSV **_**Normandy**_** SR-1****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

Commander Shepherd took his rightful place at the head of the CIC. Chief stood to his right and Liara stood to his left. He keyed the comm unit and said, "Joker, get us out of here."

"Aye, Commander." The pilot responded.

"Just a routine mission, right, Commander?" Pressly asked him.

"Yeah, a simple recon mission. We find out if there is a Geth base and destroy. Simple as that." Was his answer. While that was part of the truth, it was the whole truth. So far, nobody seemed to question why the Master Chief and Liara had come on board. Shepherd was able to convince Pressly that they were bored on the Citadel and that's why he needed to talk to Hackett. The rest of the crew didn't care or didn't bother to ask.

Shepherd felt the ship jerk backwards as the metal clamps were released off the outside of it. Joker began to move it slowly through the Citadel's shipyard. Countless ships of all different sizes littered the space around the giant space station, waiting for their docking forms to go through.

Joker was a master pilot. Shepherd had no fear that he couldn't navigate through the traffic. In no time at all, the Normandy was clear of the Citadel's arms and in open space. Shepherd felt the ship jump into faster-than-light travel, heading for the Mass Relay.

"Liara, Chief, Pressly, join me in the conference room." Shepherd said, stepping down from his post and entering a set of metal doors behind him. Chief and Liara followed behind while Pressly ordered someone to watch the deck for him. The bald man entered the room last.

Shepherd stood in front of the holopads that worked as the ship's communications area. Liara and Chief stood in front of the Spectre with Pressly in between them.

"Pressly, we've decided to let you in what's really going on." Shepherd told the bald man.

"I may be old, Commander, but I'm not stupid." The navigator responded, "Everyone is asking why the Master Chief and Liara are back on board. Some bought the 'they're bored' line you threw out, including Joker, but I didn't. I just planned on keeping my mouth shut and see what happens."

"As far as the Alliance knows, we are heading to Alchera under the belief that Saren left behind a Geth command base there. If there is

one, we will destroy it but it is unlikely that there will be one." Shepherd explained.

"Then, why are we going to Alchera?" he asked.

"You know what happened when we went through the Mu Relay." Liara chimed in, "You know where it took us and you understand what it meant, correct?"

The man nodded.

"The FIB was controlled by a Focus Icon. We have been told there are another FIB and its own Icon here in our universe." Liara said, "That is why Chief and Halsey really came with us. Helping us defeat Sovereign was just an added bonus."

"I couldn't have you all die as soon as I got here." Chief added.

"So let me guess the next thing you are going to say." Pressly smirked, folding his arms, "You believe the Icon is on Alchera."

Shepherd nodded, "This is more than just a recon mission, Press. It is a search and recover mission."

"How come the _Normandy_ always gets sent on these kinds of missions?" Pressly remarked, "The last time we tried to do a search and recover mission we ended up chasing a rouge Spectre across the galaxy. I just hope that this one ends differently than the last."

"Me too, Pressly." Shepherd stated, "This doesn't leave this room. I need someone else to help keep the moral stable. You're my guy."

"Yes, sir." Pressly nodded.

"Thank you, you are dismissed." Pressly saluted which Shepherd returned. The bald man left them alone in the room, "So what's the plan once we get to Alchera?"

"We use the _Normandy_'s scanners to search for high profile areas. Once we have one, the three of us go down and investigate." Liara explained, "That's all I got."

"I'm still cautious of the missing ships problem." Chief said, "Someone or something is there, waiting for its next victim."

"Joker will go in with the stealth drive on and shields up, just to be safe." Shepherd stated, "I don't like surprises, either."

"The only thing we can do is keep an eye out. There is no telling what we will find there." Liara added, "I tried to access the spy satellite feeds from the time of the three missing ships but all I got was static. Something is strong enough to knock it out of whack long enough for the ships to disappear."

"Liara is right. We should all get some rest. I'll have Joker wake us when we reach the Amada System." Shepherd dismissed them.

****SSV **_**Normandy**_** SR-1****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

Liara sat at the end of her bed in Doctor Chakwas's office. Upon her first time on board the _Normandy_, Liara had spent a lot of time in her office, trying to get over the trauma of what she had gone through.

Shepherd had found her locked in a Prothean booby trap, deep inside a Prothean ruin. After he rescued her from the collapsing ruin, she learned that Shepherd was looking for her mother, Matriarch Benezia. According to him, she had sided with Saren and was on Noveria. He was asking her to help kill her own mother and she accepted.

After watching her mother die in her arms, Liara found comfort in Doctor Chakwas's company. The older doctor was very proud of her position and did anything she could do for her crew. In many aspects, she was a lot like Shepherd. Even after Ashley died, Chakwas managed to find Liara's smile, again.

She looked down at the device in her hand. It was a small object with a red button in the center. It was given to her by Councilor Anderson as she left the _Kilimanjaro_.

"Why are you giving me this?" she had asked.

"In case something bad happens and you need rescuing, press that button and help will be on its way." The former captain told her.

"Why are you giving it to me? Shouldn't you be giving something like this to Shepherd?"

He shook his head, "You and I both know that Shepherd would toss it in the trash or space it the first chance he got. I giving it to you because, while you believe in Shepherd, you still have the same bad feeling that I have about this."

"You feel it, too?"

He nodded.

She clenched the beacon in her hand before putting it in the small drawer by her bed. She laid out flat on her back and looked up the ceiling. She activated her omni-tool and it displayed the last image of her mother that she enjoyed.

The Matriarch wore yellow, her favorite color. The dress covered her entire body but was tight enough to show off her many curves. Her headdress rested on the top of her head fringe and she smiled. Liara always loved her mother's smile. It might have been from the yellow dress but it always seemed to brighten up a room. She hoped that was an aspect they shared.

The image was a lot better image of the one she had of her mother the day she died. On Noveria, Benezia wore a long black dress with hints

of blue in it. Her headdress was also black with not a single sign of yellow on her. Her eyes shined white with biotic fury.

Then, the bullet hit. It hit her straight in the chest, piercing right through her biotic barrier. A one in a million shot took her mother away from her and holding the gun was her savior, Commander Shepherd. Her mother dropped to the floor and Liara wrapped her in her arms.

"Liara, you must stop him." She couldn't tell if she meant Saren or Shepherd, "He's stronger than you think."

"Who, Mother?" she asked.

"Saren." She whispered, "I love you, my daughter."

That was her last words before dying in her arms.

Liara wiped the tears away from her eyes and turned off her omni-tool. It has been a long road, Liara, she thought to herself, but we are just getting started.

****Alpha Halo****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Halo Universe****

"Chief?" Cortana's voice came through, "Chief, are you there?"

He opened his eyes and got a look around. He was on the floor of the Bumblebee with his back against the pilot's chair. The crash had caused him to roll forward and spin around so he was facing the rear of the shuttle.

Once he opened his eyes, he wished he didn't.

All around the shuttle, every single one of the marines that had been on board were dead. He was the only survivor.

"I thought I lost you." Cortana said, as Chief forced himself to his feet, "The others."

She paused as he looked around. The marine he had comforted only a few moments ago was hunched over with his cold dead hands clenching his safety harness, "The others didn't make it."

He stepped out of the Bumblebee and found that the ground was littered with ammo, weapons, and a first aid kit, along with two dead marines who weren't wearing their harnesses. He looked up at the ravine and took in his surrounds.

Two hilltops stood in front of him, blocking his view of the other side. A river cut between them and ran down the center of the valley. The river led to a waterfall and a pretty nasty fall. He used his visor to measure that the Bumblebee was exactly fifteen meters from the edge. He tried not to think about that.

"Chief, incoming. Covenant drop ship inbound." Cortana interrupted him, "Maybe we can take over in those hills."

He reached down and grabbed an assault rifle. He slammed an ammo clip in it and headed for cover. He watched as the purple shuttle roared over the large hills and dropped a team of Grunts and an Elite next to the Bumblebee. He cursed under his breath as he watched the Sangheili fire a few rounds into one of the dead marines and let out a loud laugh.

He waited until the Shadow was out of sight before he charged. He unloaded a clip of his assault rifle into the enemy. Four Grunts met the end of the bullets as he reached the end of the clip. He rolled behind a small boulder as the Elite and the remaining Grunts returned fire. He reloaded his rifle and popped up, taking two more Grunts out.

He waited for the Elite to fire again before darting out of the cover. He fired a few rounds at him, disabling his shields. Chief continued to fire at him as he charged forward. However, he ran out of bullets before the Elite was done so he had to improvise.

He slammed the butt of his rifle into the taller alien's face, knocking him to the ground. Chief jumped on top of him and continued to ram his rifle into the Sangheili until he stopped moving.

Covered in purple blood, Chief stood up and stepped away from the dead alien. He stared down at him for a whole minute, bloody rifle in hand.

He would have stood there all day if Cortana didn't interrupt him, "Chief, I'm picking up UNSC chatter from over those hills. Probably survivors, Chief."

Chief simply nodded and reloaded his rifle. He turned in the direction of Cortana's navpoint and began his trek to find the others.

****SSV **_**Normandy**_** SR-1****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

The Master Chief sat on his cot with his armor completely on besides his helmet. The helmet sat on the small cargo crate that he was using as a nightstand. Next to the helmet was his pistol and Cortana's storage unit. Her blue avatar appeared over it, "Can't sleep?"

Chief shook his head. He couldn't figure out why he was reliving an event that happened over six years ago. Yes, it was a major point in his career but he wasn't proud of it. He didn't want to re-experience every detail of those few weeks on Alpha Halo. He barely got out with his life, let alone his sanity. If it wasn't for Cortana, he would be strapped to a table and live in a padded room.

And he almost lost her.

If it wasn't for Doctor Halsey, Cortana would be gone forever. Chief and Cortana had picked a fight with a Forerunner who called himself Ur-Didact. The Didact wanted to destroy all organic life, including humans. They weren't going to let that happen.

To defeat the Didact, Cortana had sacrificed herself, leaving Chief alone for months.

Using Chief's memories and some leftover fragments from Cortana's original self, Halsey was able to revive Cortana. Technically speaking, she is not even close to the original Cortana but, thanks to Chief's memories, she had all the same memories, thoughts, and the traits as the original. She just was a little more upgraded.

"I'm thinking about what's going on back at home." He finally said.

Cortana nodded, "Lasky is on his fourth cup of coffee and is pouring himself over paperwork. Palmer is drilling the Spartan IVs on proper rifle maintenance and cleaning. Buck and Dare are off 'going over battle details'. And Roland is trying to beat Lasky's high score in Tetras. Does that sum it up?"

Chief chuckled a little. She was pretty on point. Chief could imagine that Lord Hood, the UNSC's equal to Admiral Hackett, had ordered Admiral Lasky and the _Infinity_ to stay at the FIB in case Chief and Cortana returned. That meant there was a lot of down time for Palmer to train the Spartans and for a certain ODST gunnery sergeant and a certain ONI officer to do some private planning in a dark corner of the ship.

The thought of the _Infinity_ made him homesick. He had only served on the ship for six months but it was more of a home than the _Forward Into Dawn_ and he spent four years on the _Dawn_. Granted, those four years he had been on his own with Cortana and he was frozen in cyro for most of it.

"Do we have an ETA?" he asked her.

"Two more hours until we reach the Amara System." She answered.

He stood up and grabbed his helmet, "I'll be back."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Exploring." He said, leaving her behind in his "bedroom" and heading up the metal stairs. He passed through the engine room without even being noticed and walked his way to the elevator. He took it up to the CIC and spotted Pressly, "Where's Shepherd?"

The navigator pointed to the comm room and went back to work. Chief entered the room and was surprised to see who the commander was talking to. Standing over the three holopads were virtual images of three people that Chief hadn't seen since coming to the universe.

The far right pad contained the image of a thin, three fingered female. The woman wore a suit over her entire body, making it impossible to see her face. The only reason why he could tell she was female was because the suit was form fitted to her body. Her name was Tali'Zorah and she was a Quarian, creators of the Geth.

The far left pad contained the image of a Turian male named Garrus Vakarian. Garrus wore a blue hardsuit over his scaly body. The suit

stopped at his neck, keeping his face visible. The sniper and former C-Sec officer stood with his arms crossed and his mandibles up in a Turian smirk.

The middle image was a large one. Taking up the most room in the feed was Urdnot Wrex, a Krogan battlemaster. Wrex wore a blood red hardsuit that covered his large hump that extended above his head. His scared up face shined with the same color as his armor.

"Well, I'm glad to see that you all are making out well." Shepherd said, not noticed Chief, "Tali, congrats on the official completion of your Pilgrimage."

"Thank you, Shepherd, but it appears you have a visitor." She looked at Chief who had stepped next to Shepherd.

Shepherd looked up at the taller man, "Looks like it."

Chief looked at Shepherd's former crew members and nodded at them.

"Damn, Chief, you look bored. Blow anything up lately?" Wrex asked the Spartan.

"Probably about the same amount as you, Clan Leader." Shepherd responded, answering for Chief.

"Yeah, this leader thing is boring but it needs to be done. Who else will make sure these idiots do their jobs right?" the Krogan smirked.

"A working Krogan. Now, that's an oxymoron." Garrus joked.

"Just because your lightyears away, doesn't mean you can crack jokes, Vakarian." Wrex shot back.

"Where are you, anyway, Garrus?" Tali asked.

"You know, a little bit here, a little bit there. I'm pretty much everywhere these days." The Turian answered, "How about you, Shepherd? Where you heading?"

Chief noticed Shepherd half-smile at the way Garrus took the attention off himself, "Amara System. Looking into a possible Geth base. Nothing major."

"Then, why is the Spartan with you?" Wrex pointed out.

"I got bored." Chief answered for him.

"Anyway, I'm glad to see everyone is settling into anything alright. I'll contact you guys if anything interesting happens. Shepherd out." The former crewmembers said their good-byes and were gone, leaving Chief alone with the commander, "So what's on your mind?"

Chief was surprised to hear him respond that way but he went with it, "Home. It's been almost a month and this is our first major lead on the Icon. This lead could very much be a dead end. It could take years to find the Icon."

"That's what they said about Ilos but I did that in a matter of days." Shepherd stated, "Your Lord Hood said that it would take days to take back the FIB but it only took us a few hours. Don't count us out before we get started, Chief."

"I wasn't. I just have a bad feeling about this mission."

Shepherd nodded, "Me too. This should be a routine mission but there is no such thing as routine anymore. Last routine mission I went on was to Eden Prime. That mission ended with a whole dead colony, a dead Spectre, a rouge Spectre, and a vision creating beacon that showed the demise of entire species. If this mission goes worse than that then one of us better end up dead."

"When you put it that way, it makes me feel a little better." Chief said back to him.

"Come on," Shepherd patted the armored shoulder of Chief, "let's go down to the mess and see if there's anything good to eat."

Together, they walked out of the comm room with only one hour until they reach the Amara System.

Thank you for taking the time to read my story. I really hope you are enjoying it so far. Don't forget to leave me some feedback. Any feedback I get will help make future chapters even better.

3. Chapter 3: The Fallen

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Chapter Three: The Fallen

SSV **_Normandy**_** SR-1**

Milky Way Galaxy

Mass Effect Universe

"Shepherd," Joker turned his head, "we are dropping out of FTL travel now. We should have our first visuals on Alchera."

"Good. Bring our stealth drives online and shields up." He ordered.

"Roger that, Commander. Can't be too careful." The helmsman stated, following his commanding officer's orders, "We are undetectable and ready to take a beating."

"Keep me posted." Shepherd turned and left through the door, leaving Pressly to watch over Joker and Caroline Grenado, Joker's "co-pilot". He made his way pass the CIC and down the stairs to the mess hall. He wore his N7 hardsuit and carried his helmet under his arm. He didn't know why he had suited up so early but he knew that he wouldn't regret it. As soon as they located Liara's vault, they would be off to find it.

He stopped at the small kitchen area and poured himself a cup of

coffee. He took a sip, placing his helmet on the counter. The coffee had gone cold since nobody was watching it but he didn't mind too much. Cold coffee was better than no coffee.

This could be it, he thought to himself. The vault could have the Icon inside and their search would be over before they really get started. They still have to find the FIB but, at least, they would have the Icon, already. He tried to think where a species from another universe would hide something so large. He thought about all the places he had been to. Noveria, Virmire, Ilos, but none of them struck him as a hiding place from an interstellar bridge.

Virmire. The simple thought of that place gave him chills. He had left someone behind there. Someone he would never forget. It was the hardest choice he ever had to make. He only had time to save one person: Kaiden Alenko or Ashley Williams. He chose Kaiden.

Now, he had no idea where the biotic marine was. After the Geth attack, he was reassigned to a top secret post under Hackett's orders. Not even Shepherd's Spectre status granted him the information on Alenko. It's been a month since they last talked to each other.

Kaiden had been with Shepherd since the beginning. He was with him when they first landed on Eden Prime. He was with him when they confronted Benezia on Noveria. He was with him when Saren attacked them on Virmire. Kaidan was more than his friend. He was his brother.

That made Ashley like his sister. After meeting her on Eden Prime, the lone survivor of the attack was transferred to his command after she showed how good she really was. While Kaiden had been there with him, Ashley had saved Shepherd too many times. On Eden Prime, she had defended him while he disarmed a bomb. On Feros, she used a gas mine to knock out an attacking settler who had been controlled by the Thorian. On Virmire, she watched his back when he had to calm Wrex down from shooting up the place.

He needed them both right now.

****SSV **_**Normandy**_** SR-1****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

"Disabling FTL drives." Joker said, "Emission sinks active. The board's all green. We are running silent."

"Good work, Joker." Pressly said to the pilot, "Start scanning the planet below. This better not be a waste of time."

"Three ships have gone missing here in the past month. Something had to happen to them." Joker shot back.

"My money's on slavers. The Terminus is crawling with them." Pressly returned.

"I'm picking up something on the long range scanners." Ensign Grenado interrupted them, "Unidentified vessel. Looks like a

cruiser."

"Doesn't match any known signatures." Joker added, looking at his own computer system.

"The cruiser is changing course." Grenado pointed out, "Now on intercept trajectory."

"Can't be!" Pressly barked at her, "Stealth systems are engaged. There is no way a Geth ship couldâ€¦"

"It's not the Geth!" Joker interrupted him, "Brace for evasive maneuvers!"

He jerked the ship to the starboard side, attempting to save her from the first shot. He failed. The massive energy beam slammed into the side of the ship, causing an explosion on that side of the cockpit. From behind him, Joker heard a man's scream as he hit the floor.

"Pressly!" Ensign Grenado attempted to help the falling executive officer but a second explosion stopped her from taking the chance. Joker was now alone in the cockpit. It was just him, the Normandy, and whoever was shooting at them.

Not knowing what else to do, he opened a channel across the Normandy and began giving status updates. "Kinetic barriers down. Multiple hull breaches. Weapons offline. Somebody get that fire out!"

Another volley came from the unknown ship. The worst part was that it was behind him so Joker had no idea what his attacker looked like. Judging by the readings on his screen, it was a massive ship. It was nowhere near as large as the Infinity but it rivaled the Destiny Ascension, the Citadel Councilor's private ship. He had no idea how he was going to fight a ship of its caliber. He hoped by broadcasting it over the intercom that Shepherd would think of something.

He could only hope, otherwise everyone on board the Normandy would end up like Pressly and Grenado. The thought of that happening brought panic to Joker's mind. One moment, he had been joking with the bald executive officer and, the next, he was gone. Grenado was still young and could have been a great pilot but she was gone, as well. He couldn't let that happen to anyone else.

He will die before he let the Normandy go down.

****SSV **_**Normandy**_** SR-1****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

Chief awoke to the alert sirens. At first, he thought he was dreaming. He had been dreaming so much lately that he wouldn't have doubted it. He barely could make out his surroundings but he knew where he was. He was in his "bedroom" on board the Normandy. He sprung from his bed and looked at Cortana, "What's happening?"

"A large cruiser is attacking us. It doesn't look good, Chief." Was

the AI's response as he pulled his helmet over his head and put her data chip inside it. He attached the small storage device to his left hip and snapped his pistol to his right. He reached down and hurled the metal arms chest onto his back, letting the magnetic braces connect it into place.

He turned for the stairs and made a jog for it. Several pipes shot out hot air that his shields absorbed. At the top of the stairs, Engineer Adams stood with a breathing mask over his mouth, "Chief, we got hull breaches. We are ordered to evacuate the engine room."

"What about the engine core?" he asked.

"Shepherd is calling an abandon ship. Managing the core does not matter anymore." Was his answer as he turned for the exit. Two engineers were attempting to pull the doors apart but the _Normandy's_ VI had sealed them shut.

"Adams," the female engineer called over, "they won't budge."

Before Adams could answer, Chief raced to the door. Using his strength, he pulled the doors apart and held them. He grunted out an order to them, "Go!"

The three engineers ducked under his arms and out of the room. Chief could feel the doors pushing back on him but he stayed strong. Thanks to his Spartan training, Chief could withstand an incredible amount of force which made him in charge of flipping the tanks over when they tip. Once Adams was through, Chief lunged forward, letting the doors slam shut behind him.

"Thanks, Chief, we owe you." Adams said the words that Chief had heard so many times in the past.

The four of them raced through the damaged _Normandy_. In the docking bay, the Mako was turned over on its side. The lockers had detached from the walls and slammed against the metal flooring. Several servicemen had entered the elevator, causing them to have to use a maintenance ladder to the next level.

One by one, they moved up the ladder with Chief at the rear. Explosions echoed from below them as they reached the top. Stepping out of the maintenance tunnel, Chief almost ran into Liara.

The Asari stood with her pink hardsuit on and her helmet in her hand, "Chief, we need to find Shepherd."

"He will be at the escape pods." Chief told her. He doubted that he would be there but he needed to get everyone to safety, including Liara.

Liara nodded and turned for the mess hall. They followed close behind, dodging falling debris from all around. To Chief's surprise, Shepherd was near the escape pods. He was using his omni-tool to repair one of the broken tech boxes.

"Shepherd!" Liara stopped.

Shepherd turned, his helmet shield over his face, "Liara, get in the

escape pod."

"Joker is still in the cockpit. He refuses to leave the _Normandy_." She told him. He moved to another damaged box. Liara used her biotics to hold up a metal pipe that had fallen, "I'm not leaving, either."

"I need you to get the crew out of here and make sure they are taken care of." Shepherd said, calmly, "You and Chief need to go. I'll take care of Joker."

"Commander." She said as he pushed past her to leave.

He stopped to turn his head, "Liara, go. Now!"

He kept on walking after that. Chief had to grab Liara, otherwise she would have chased after him. He pushed her into the escape pod with Adams and the engineers. He used his own omni-tool to close the door behind him. With a deep breath, Chief pressed the launch button.

The escape pod shot out from the underside of the _Normandy_ and was hurled down to the planet below. Since the pod had no windows, they were unable to see the ship that had ended their journey."

Liara sat on one of the bench chairs that the pod had. She had a stone expression that Chief had a hard time reading but he knew what it was. She was worried and didn't want to show it. Shepherd and Joker were the only ones left on board the _Normandy_ and the ship was barely hanging on. Chief tried not to think about what would happen if Shepherd couldn't make it to Joker in time.

He patted Liara's shoulder, "He'll be okay."

She nodded up at him.

One of the engineers, who had quiet the whole time, grabbed Chief's arm, "We're going to make it, aren't we, sir? I don't want to die out here!"

The words echoed in head. The escape pod, being attacked by an unknown enemy, crashing down on an unknown planet, it all seemed too familiar. He hoped that it would be different than last time.

He nodded at the engineer, "It will be fine."

Adams had his omni-tool out, reading something, "Heads up everybody, this is it! Breaking Alchera's atmosphere in five."

"Sure you don't you want to take a seat, Chief?" Cortana asked in his helmet.

Instead of arguing, he listened. He sat down on the bench and buckled himself in. He was tired of too many rough crash landings, "We'll be fine."

"Fingers crossed, John?" she asked and he smirked under his helmet.

The seconds felt like minutes as the pod crashed through the planet's weak atmosphere. Moments after they broke the cloud line, they

slammed into the ground below, skidding to a stop.

Once the pod had stopped moving, Chief opened his eyes. He tried not to think about the Alpha Halo and the Bumblebee. That ended with him being the only survivor. He was glad to see that this crash landing's outcome was a lot better than that one.

Adams had bumped his head on one of the bulkheads, leaving a nasty bruise on his forehead. The female engineer that had realized the engine room door was sealed had cut her cheek on something and had received a bruised arm. The male engineer that had thought they were going to die had come through without a scratch.

Liara and Chief were saved by their hardsuits. Chief's shielding had dropped to about half while Liara's were completely gone but it didn't matter too much. All and all he was happy with the results.

Chief was the first one to stand. He made sure everyone had their masks on before he opened the hatch. With the hatch open, they received their first view of Alchera. The ground was a deep purple and was very rocky. It reminded Chief of the surface of the Moon but with large spires rather than craters. The sky was black and he couldn't find the Normandy or the ship that attacked them in it.

Liara stepped out of the pod behind him, hoping something in her hand. She held it up, revealing the same red button, "Help should be on its way. Anderson gave this to me in case something like this happened."

"Smart." Chief grunted, still scanning the sky. He turned to the engineers, "The Normandy launched four other pods. We need to find them and regroup together."

"Yes, sir." They sounded in unison.

"Cortana, are you picking up anything?" he asked her.

"Yes, actually, the pods give off a unique transponder message once they crash. It makes locating them a lot easier. I can set navpoints for you." She delivered.

"Excellent." The first navpoint was less than a kilometer away, "Follow me."

****The Citadel****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

David Anderson entered his office, coffee in hand. He had spent the better part of the day in and out of meetings with the different Council races. His first meeting had been with the Elcor ambassador over some issue regarding a Volus diplomat. He almost laughed when he got that message. An Elcor getting harassed by a Volus, biggest species on the Citadel being picked on by the smallest, he almost laughed too hard. His day went like that from then on.

Bailey had been walking with him the whole time, keeping an eye out for humanity's many enemies. Bailey was a good soldier and great leader. He reminded Anderson of Shepherd in a way. If things had been different, it would be Bailey captaining the _Normandy_, not Shepherd.

"Councilor," Bailey said, as they made it to his desk, "I was hoping to talk to you about something. Something important."

"What is it, Armando?" Anderson asked him.

"I was approached by Executor Pallin yesterday after work. He wanted to talk to me about reassignment to C-Sec as a captain." Bailey told the councilor.

"And?" Anderson raised an eyebrow.

"I want to accept it." Anderson smirked at him.

"You know, you would have to retire from the Alliance."

"I understand that, sir." Bailey nodded.

Anderson nodded back, "Having one of our guys in C-Sec's higher ups would be good for us. I will talk to Hackett for you and see if I can get your papers moved."

"Thank you, sir. I really appreciate it."

That was when Anderson's face changed. He went from being serious to a face that he hadn't had on since Eden Prime. It was the face he made when he saw Sovereign for the first time. Fear.

"What's wrong, sir?"

He looked up. He didn't know how long it had been there but the red light on his desktop was telling him something that he hadn't noticed until now. He couldn't believe it but it was blinking bright red. That could only mean one thing, "Bailey, get me Hackett and get me him now. Shepherd's in trouble."

****Alchera****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

They were only missing twenty-two people. Two of them were Joker and Shepherd. The other twenty had fallen before making it to the escape pods. The rest of the _Normandy_'s surviving crew had made it down to the planet with little to no injuries. They had grouped together at the last escape pod, waiting for Liara's backup plan to come. They had no idea how long it would take but they knew one thing, Shepherd was still up there.

Liara kept staring up at the sky all the while, hoping to see his pod, but she knew better. The _Normandy_ was in a different part of the sky from what she was looking at. She wouldn't see his pod fall from it. She was waiting on Cortana, who continued to scan the area.

She looked around at the crew. Doctor Chakwas saw to the small injuries and made sure they were wrapped properly. Adams and three other crewmembers helped others into environmental suits to keep their skin safe from Alchera's weak atmosphere. Chief paced back and forth while Cortana was doing her job.

All the while, Liara was useless. She couldn't do much of anything at the moment beside hope to see Shepherd's face again. How long had it been since the crash? She started to worry more with every question she asked herself.

How long would it take the Alliance to find them?

How fast could they get to Shepherd's pod when it crashes?

Who attacked them?

Why?

There was only one question she didn't want to ask because it would send Chief on a hunt through the planet. She kept the question to herself but she knew that Cortana had already thought about it. Where's the vault?

The whole reason they had come to Alchera was to find the vault that could house the Focus Icon. If she vocalized that, Chief would leave them to go find it. She wouldn't blame him for wanting to go home again but she needed him here. They all needed him here.

With Shepherd missing, Chief was the closing thing to a leader that they had. Granted, some of the surviving crew outranks Chief but they don't out-experience him. Chief had seen some crazy stuff that she would never believe. He comes from a whole different universe, after all. Sure, she fought Rachnii on Noveria and Thorian on Feros but those would have been a piece of cake for the Spartan.

She recalled some of the stories of the Master Chief from her time on the Infinity. The UNSC marines called him unstoppable. His superior officers called him dependable. The Sangheili Separatists called him a demon in angel clothing. All of those descriptions were spot on in her book.

His resume makes Shepherd's look like a Krogan in a dress. The stories about him destroying a parasite called the Flood and defeating the Covenant's hierarchy almost single handedly expressed her. The follow up story of him spending four years on his own in space and coming out to defeat a being that was over a million years old was unbelievable. If she hadn't seen the vids that Halsey had, she would have never thought it possible but it was. The Master Chief was the real deal.

That was when she noticed that he stopped pacing. He was standing completely still with his hand up to his helmet's temple. He looked up at Liara and sounded, "We got a pod crashing."

Shepherd, she thought. The two of them left the crew behind and raced for Cortana's navpoint. The rocky terrain of the planet made it extremely hard to move but Chief made it look like flatland. The Spartan darted from rock spire to rock spire, moving a lot faster

than Liara could hope to go. Even with her biotics, she could propel herself enough to keep pace with the super soldier.

According to Cortana, Shepherd's pod would crash three kilometers from their base camp. While that was long distance to cross, they seem to making great time. It might have been the adrenaline that had been pumping through her body since the attack.

The two of them bolted through a pair of spires and got their first sight at the pod. It had crashed into a small ravine, next to an empty river bank. They slid their way down the side of the mountain-like hill and made it to the pod.

Using his strength, Chief grabbed the hatch and ripped it clean off. He tossed it behind him. They looked inside the pod and they froze from what they saw.

****SSV **_**Normandy**_** SR-1****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Mass Effect Universe****

"Liara, go. Now!" Shepherd ordered as he turned to make the walk to the cockpit. He could hear Liara yelling behind him as Chief pulled her into the pod. He took a deep breath when he heard the pod jet out from the _Normandy_.

Just me and Joker, now, he thought to himself as he ascended the staircase that would lead to the CIC. The door opened and all sound stopped. The ceiling of the _Normandy_ had been ripped off and parts of the ship had peeled back like a can of sardines. The galaxy map continued to play but static rushed through it as the ship lost power. Debris floated in midair and pipes were burst open, letting form and gas fly out into space.

Thanks to his hardsuit, Shepherd was able to walk normally through the CIC and down the hallway. The door to the cockpit was open but an energy shield sealed it off from the rest of the ship. Shepherd noticed Joker inside, pleading with the ship to stay together.

He nearly jumped when Shepherd placed his hand on his shoulder, "Come on, Joker, we have to get out of here."

"No!" he yelled like a child, "I won't abandon the _Normandy_! I can still save her!"

"The _Normandy_ is dead, just like us if we don't get out of here." He bellowed back at the pilot.

"No, we just have toâ€¦!" he shook his head, "Oh no, they're coming around for another attack!"

Shepherd grabbed Joker by the arm and yanked him out of the chair. He draped the disabled pilot over one of his arm and dragged him out of the cockpit. With his mask over tight, Shepherd carried him down the hallway, avoid the energy beam shot that the enemy ship was firing.

By the grace of God, he managed to make his way to escape pod. He

fastened Joker into the seat harness. He turned his head as he heard an explosion next to him. The blast sent Shepherd backwards, away from the pod. He rolled his body to avoid the fire that had split himself from Joker and the pod. He looked up and caught the eye of the pilot.

"Commander!" he yelled at him.

Shepherd knew he only had one choice to make. In his life, he had thousands of choices that rested upon him. Saving the Council or leave them to die. Kill the Rachnii Queen or let her live. Ashley or Kaidan.

Now, he only had one choice.

"Shepherd, don't" Joker continued to yell as Shepherd brought up his omni-tool and pressed the button. The door to the pod closed and it shot out from under the Normandy. Before he could dwell on what happened, another energy blast shot down at the ship, causing more havoc for him. The blast hit him in the chest and slammed him against another bulkhead.

Upon collision with the bulkhead, he busted through it and out into space. The wreck of the Normandy surrounded him and he got his first and only glimpse at his attacker. The cruiser was the second largest ship had ever since in his universe. It was only a little smaller than Sovereign. It was a long ship that reminded Shepherd of a cigar. The energy beam had ejected from the front of the ship.

Even though his ship was completely destroyed and he was floating in mid space, he was very much alive. He hoped that somebody was about to get a distress beacon out to the Alliance because it was going to get cold very fast.

That was when he heard it.

It sounded like the air getting let out of a balloon. He slammed his hand against his helmet to try to cover the hardsuit leak. As he did so, another one popped up on his leg and another on his arm. He felt the vacuum of space sucking the air from his lungs. All he could do was to wait for the pain to stop and it did.

He floated through space, motionless and dead.

**I hope you enjoyed this chapter and will leave me some feedback.
Thank you for reading!**

End
file.